

Language through Art: An ESL Enrichment Curriculum (Beginning) Information for Teaching

Empire State Building, New York

Lewis W. Hine (American, 1874–1940)
1931
Gelatin silver print
9 1/2 x 7 9/16 in.
84.XM.470.1



Background Information

[T]hey swung me out in a box from the hundredth floor—a sheer drop of nearly a quarter of a mile—to get some shots of the tower. The Boss argued that it had never been done and could never be done again and that, anyway, it’s safer than a ride on a Pullman or a walk in the city streets. So he prevailed.

—Letter from Lewis W. Hine to Paul Kellogg, November 25, 1930

In this photograph, two construction workers perch precariously on the steel structure of what would become the tallest building in the world in 1931—the Empire State Building. Towering above the rooftops of neighboring buildings, the men appear to secure rivets in the steel structure without the security of ropes or safety belts. In 1930, the photographer Lewis W. Hine was hired to document the construction of the Empire State Building. It was completed in just over thirteen months due to the hard work of over three thousand people, including recent immigrants and Mohawk ironworkers, who toiled through weekends and holidays. Hine took more than one thousand pictures of its construction, standing at the top of the structure as it grew to over one thousand feet above the New York streets. Hine’s images put a human face on an engineering feat, showing the necessity of brave, skilled workers during an era labeled as the “machine age.” Several of his Empire State Building photographs were published in a 1932 picture book intended for adolescents called *Men at Work*.

About the Artist

Lewis W. Hine (American, 1874–1940)

Originally trained to be a teacher, Hine decided to commit to a career in photography while shooting pictures of immigrants arriving on Ellis Island. Known as one of the first photographers to use the camera as a social documentary tool, he “wanted to show things that had to be corrected.” For nearly ten years while working for the National Child Labor Committee, Hine photographed the harsh truths of child labor in factories and mines. These photographs were instrumental in the passage of child labor laws in the United States.